

An Open Letter to the Board of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

With assets greater than \$7 billion, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation makes more than \$300 million in grants annually “to solve social and environmental problems at home and around the world.” This summer, Paul Brest, former dean of the Stanford University Law School, announced his intention to retire as president of the foundation and return to teaching. This is a time of great change and opportunity for your institution.

Trustees have no more important role than selecting the CEO. In this, as in other areas, you are stewards of tremendous public trust. The generous tax subsidies provided to donors and to foundations make the government and the public partners with philanthropists in pursuit of the common good. The public seeks – and has a right to expect – the best from our nation’s grantmakers.

Because ultimate stewardship of the Hewlett Foundation falls to you, the board, we hope you will consider the following four suggestions as you conduct your search. We believe strongly that, with the right leadership, the foundation can improve upon its already impressive legacy.

1. The next president of the Hewlett Foundation should be someone who maintains the foundation’s historic commitment to philanthropic effectiveness.

The effectiveness of nonprofits depends in large part on the availability of flexible, stable financing. Social impact requires effective programs and organizations with the resources to cover program costs and administrative expenses and to respond to new opportunities, challenges and ever-evolving community needs.

Mr. Brest has consistently and compellingly argued for “a presumption in favor of general operating support,” and, under his direction, the foundation has continued its leadership in this regard. An analysis in 2009 found that the Hewlett Foundation outperforms more than 85 percent of larger grantmakers in terms of the share of grant dollars provided as general operating support and multi-year support. Your commitment to providing these types of funding is known, appreciated and should continue.

2. The next president should be someone who understands the role that race continues to play in determining life opportunities in America and has a proven record of advancing equity.

Despite the progress we have made, racial inequality and other significant disparities persist in our country. To remain relevant in an increasingly diverse America, grantmakers must ensure that the benefits they help to create reach communities of color and other marginalized groups.

“Instead of succumbing to the denial and hypersensitivity about racial issues, foundations, charities, and others involved in philanthropy should take advantage of this window of opportunity to help our communities, and indeed our entire nation, overcome this syndrome and make genuine progress,” wrote Sterling Speirn, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in an August 7, 2010 *Chronicle of Philanthropy* op-ed.

In 2007, the Hewlett Foundation admirably published its evaluation of the Neighborhood Improvement Initiative (NII), a ten-year, \$20-million campaign to reduce poverty in the largely African American and Latino neighborhoods of West Oakland, Mayfair and East Palo Alto.

Mr. Brest said that NII as a whole proved “a great disappointment.” Prudence Brown and Leila Fiester, authors of the foundation’s evaluation of NII, contended, “NII missed the opportunity to explicitly lift up, examine, understand and react to the racial and ethnic tensions that existed in NII neighborhoods – and, consequently, to learn from them.”

Since NII, the Hewlett Foundation has built its relationships in East Palo Alto and increased its investments there. The next leader of the Hewlett Foundation should accelerate the foundation’s commitment to racial equity and social inclusion. A new CEO could accomplish this by building capacity in underserved communities and by improving the foundation’s capacity to work more often and more effectively with nonprofits serving and led by people with the least wealth, opportunity and power.

3. The next president should be someone with deep experience and passion for the highest-impact grantmaking strategies of grassroots advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement.

Anyone interested in systemic or institutional change knows the value of investing heavily in better public policy. Indeed, the resources of government and the marketplace overwhelm the dollars that even foundations like the Hewlett Foundation can bring to bear on issues of great importance. A grantmaker who forswears advocacy, organizing and civic engagement is a grantmaker without the means to influence those larger forces.

The Hewlett Foundation’s founding support of the ClimateWorks Foundation and its recent creation of the California Education Policy Fund also demonstrate the foundation’s understanding that limited dollars are often best leveraged by attempting to influence systems holistically.

Having helped to create new and successful organizations, the Hewlett Foundation should increase the proportion of its advocacy dollars going to the grassroots. Sustainable progress requires an ecosystem of effective actors. Greater investment in grassroots organizations will renew the public enthusiasm and political pressure required to uphold recent victories and win new battles.

4. The next president should be someone who understands the limits of “strategic philanthropy.”

Mr. Brest is a recognized thought leader in strategic philanthropy. The trustees can ensure that his and the foundation’s commitment to effectiveness and impact continue while addressing the shortcomings associated with this approach.

Strategic philanthropy too often favors a linear, excessively technocratic view of social change. The Hewlett Foundation should look for a CEO who can implement a diversified approach more suited to the dynamic and uncertain environments it hopes to influence. The recent essay “Letting Go” by current and former Hewlett staffers Kristi Kimball and Malka Kopell in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* provides excellent guidance in this regard.

The strategic philanthropy approach also sometimes puts excessive burdens on grantee organizations, especially smaller ones. Following the suggestions of recent Grantee Perception Reports, the next CEO should continue the foundation’s drive to streamline its application and reporting processes.

Conclusion

The ideal new leader of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation will challenge the foundation and help it improve upon its already impressive legacy.

It is up to you to use your best judgment during this process. The causes and communities you care about are counting on you.

Sincerely,

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